

A chortlingly satisfying Falstaff

OPERA

Falstaff

WA Opera

His Majesty's Theatre

REVIEW ROSALIND APPELBY

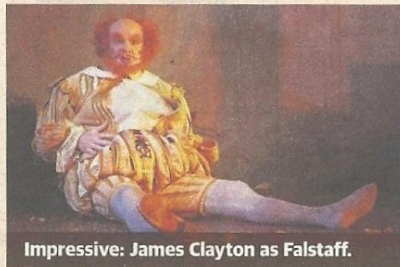
In Giuseppe Verdi's final years he experienced something of an Indian summer where he returned to composing operas and wrote his "last great laugh". Falstaff is a flourish of frivolity and on opening night the WA Opera made merry with its Opera Conference production. I've rarely heard an opera house audience chortle so loudly.

The protagonist Falstaff is drawn from Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and Henry IV. Falstaff's huge appetite for food and sexual gratification leads him to seduce two women with an identical love letter. The women discover the duplication and lure Falstaff into a series of

pranks to reveal his folly. Along the way they help Nannetta in avoiding an arranged marriage with Dr Caius, reasoning it is better to be "stoned to death with a volley of cabbages" than marry the obsequious old doctor. Slapstick and early feminism are happy bedfellows as the wives conspire to pull one over the men.

Verdi condenses his luscious melodies into a bustling orchestral soundtrack with arias replaced by fast comic patter. The orchestra takes part in the revelry; wind instruments jingle like coins when money is mentioned and bassoons bray like a donkey when Falstaff realises he is being an ass. Conductor Simon Hewett is to be commended for the trim, bright contributions from the WA Symphony Orchestra.

Simon Phillips' production (revived by Julia Edwardson) keeps the stage buzzing with activity. The chorus and cast are constantly spilling out of the doors and windows of Iain Aitken's doll's house-like revolving set. Bold, surreal lighting



Impressive: James Clayton as Falstaff.

(Nick Schlieper) and colour-coded costumes (Tracy Grant Lord) differentiate the scenes and hint at the seasons of Falstaff's life. The street scene is toned a spring green, the house a summery yellow, the final forest scene a wintry white. The crucial river scene where Falstaff realises he is fat and greying is autumnal.

James Clayton is deliciously egotistical as Falstaff, relishing his paunch, wobbling his rear and swatting his henchmen. He traverses the comic and the melancholic with ease, emerging waterlogged from the river to confront his own

mortality, then promptly forgetting it as his deflated ego is fortified by a glass of mulled wine. It is an impressive performance, delivered with gleaming vocal technique.

The opera is all about ensemble and the rest of the cast are crucial. Bardolph (Gerard Schneider) and Pistol (Ryan Sharp) vie for laughs as Falstaff's henchmen, two comic actors worth the ticket price alone.

The vocally blossoming Katja Webb sings Nannetta with bubbly girlishness and a floating soprano line. Samuel Sakker is thin-voiced as her suitor Fenton. Elisa Wilson is a strong voice and stage presence as Alice Ford and Sitiveni Talei rages darkly as the jealous Mr Ford. Sally-Anne Russell and Sarah-Janet Brittenden are less vocally lustrous but dramatically convincing as Mistress Quickly and Meg.

The production touches too lightly on Verdian melancholy; we laugh at Falstaff more than we learn from him. But if you like opera that romps from beginning to end then you will love this.

■ Falstaff is on tonight, Tuesday, Thursday and next Saturday.